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SUBJECT: HOLY SEE TAKING SMALL STEPS IN RELATIONS WITH
RUSSIAN ORTHODOX

Classified By: Ambassador Jim Nicholson for reasons 1.5 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY

1. (C) Cardinal Walter Kasper, the Holy See official responsible for relations with the Orthodox Church, judged his February trip to Moscow to meet with Russian Orthodoxy's highest officials "not easy, but helpful." Kasper told the Ambassador that Patriarch Alexei II and Metropolitan Kirill, the Russian Orthodox Church's (ROC) equivalent of a foreign minister, raised the ROC's traditional concerns of proselytism and relations with Eastern Catholic Churches during Kasper's February meetings in Moscow. Though Kasper questioned the legitimacy of these well-rehearsed complaints, and described a certain Russian Orthodox "double standard" on religious freedom issues, he nevertheless saw some "small steps" forward in the encounter and said the Holy See will continue to pursue its dialogue with the Russian Orthodox. Despite this commitment, obstacles to a closer relationship between the two churches persist and will likely preclude any major breakthroughs in the near future that would allow the Pope to fulfill his earnest desire to visit Moscow. End Summary.

"NOT EASY, BUT USEFUL"

2. (SBU) The Vatican's senior ecumenical troubleshooter, Cardinal Walter Kasper, spent several days in Moscow in late February meeting with Russian Orthodoxy's highest officials, including Patriarch Alexei II and Metropolitan Kirill, the Orthodox Church's equivalent of a foreign minister. German-born Kasper, President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, told the Ambassador March 10 that the trip was "not easy, but useful."

FIRST STEPS WITH RUSSIAN ORTHODOX FM

3. (SBU) Kasper began his visit with a February 19 meeting with Metropolitan Kirill focused on the prospect of upgrading the Ukrainian Catholic jurisdiction into a Patriarchate -- a move commensurate with its size and history, but one that would be perceived by the Orthodox world as a challenge to the Russian Orthodox territorial claims. The Vatican's desire to move forward with this shift has been tempered by the ecumenical fall-out of its decision in 2002 to raise the status of its ecclesiastical jurisdictions in Russia. (Comment: The Russian Orthodox have traditionally challenged the connections between the Eastern Catholic Churches and Rome, since many in the East feel the churches should be in union with Moscow or another Eastern Church, and not with the Holy See. End comment.)

4. (C) Kasper confirmed to the Ambassador the Holy See's desire to move slowly on the Ukrainian issue. Although Kasper put little stock in the legitimacy of Russian objections to the Patriarchate, he was not inclined to placate the Ukrainians at the risk of upsetting the current delicate balance of Catholic-Orthodox relations. The Cardinal also noted the "significant political motivation" behind the Ukrainian Catholics' desires for a Patriarchate. Ukrainian nationalists, he pointed out, saw this as another way to pull Ukraine away from Russian influence. It is likely that this political motivation has tempered the Vatican's sympathy for Ukrainian Catholic aims.

PATRIARCH ALEXEI USES TRADITIONAL RHETORIC

5. (SBU) Kasper's February 22 meeting with Patriarch Alexei II -- his first since taking over the Christian Unity Council and the first at this level in four years -- marked a step forward for the two churchmen, who have had cool personal relations. The novelty of the high-level meeting, according to Kasper, quickly gave way to familiar accusations, with the

Russian Orthodox leader making his standard charges of Vatican poaching on Orthodox territory, and asserting that Catholics were trying to convert Eastern faithful "to Rome."

16. (C) Kasper repeated to the Ambassador what Catholics have often said in response to such charges. There is no way to defend them without having specific examples. As a result, Kasper said the two agreed to establish a "joint commission" of members of the Orthodox and Catholic hierarchies in Russia that would examine specific instances of alleged proselytism and other issues of interest. This would allow the churches

to move beyond vague accusations. Kasper said he was less than convinced that the commission would become a reality, however. "In the past, (the Orthodox) have often said they would do things, but have not followed through," he cautioned. Significantly, Kasper also stressed to Moscow's Catholics in an address prior to his other appointments that they shared their Christian faith with the Orthodox and, in effect, warned them against proselytism.

Orthodox Double Standard

17. (C) The need to defend the Catholic Church against continued Orthodox complaints of conversion efforts obviously rankles many in the Holy See. Kasper described the Orthodox attention to the subject as a "certain obsession" in a culture that was somewhat paranoid and still trapped in many ways in a Soviet mentality. "Look," Kasper said to the Ambassador, "we don't want to make Russia a Catholic country. That would be a crazy idea." At the same time, he noted that there have been Catholics in Russia for generations who want and need a Catholic clerical and organizational presence. At the heart of things, according to Kasper, is a double standard applied by the Orthodox. "There are Catholics in the West who convert to Orthodoxy," he said. "We don't have a problem with that because it's a matter of their conscience." Though you don't hear the Russian Orthodox complaining about their Church gaining converts, Kasper said, they "don't really believe in religious freedom" in their own territory.

HOW DOES PUTIN FIT IN?

18. (C) When the Ambassador asked if Kasper had President Putin to thank for the meeting with Alexei, the Cardinal said it was possible. He acknowledged Putin's desire for the Orthodox Church to play a role in keeping Ukraine within the Russian orbit, and the political advantages Putin might gain by aligning himself with the Church. According to Kasper, the Orthodox connection probably enhances Putin's standing with the Russian people, who are thirsting for identity after losing the Soviet identity that bound them for the bulk of the 20th century. Kasper wondered aloud how Putin's religious sensibilities would change if they became less useful politically.

POSITIVE SIGNS

19. (SBU) Despite the traditional roadblocks in the relationship, Kasper did see some positive elements from his meetings. In addition to the agreement on the joint commission, the Cardinal was heartened by the Patriarch's firm agreement with the Holy See on the need to defend Christian values in the context of Western European secularism and both sides willingness to cooperate in promoting such values. They also agreed on academic collaboration via a proposed exchange program for faculty and students from theological schools.

COMMENT: DIALOGUE CONTINUES WITH "SMALL STEPS"

10. (SBU) Kasper had prefaced his high-level meetings by telling Moscow's small Roman Catholic community that the Vatican had modest expectations for the visit. The German-born Cardinal said "small steps" were important -- as small as "exchanging friendly greetings, gestures of friendship, (and) showing a smiling face." This is a long way from the Vatican's real goal of a papal visit to Moscow, and reflects the reality of the unflinching Orthodox stance on the issues noted above. In fact, while the Holy See officially holds out the olive branch to the Russian Orthodox Church, it is disappointed and frustrated with perceived Orthodox intransigence. "Small steps" notwithstanding, Pope John Paul II's oft-repeated utopian vision of a united Church in Europe breathing with both Eastern (Orthodox) and Western (Roman) lungs looks unlikely to be realized in his lifetime.

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